the sun sets twice
Tim Gardiner

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Tim Gardiner

Introduction

The great Japanese haiku poet, Matsuo Bashō, first coined the term haibun in 1690. Haibun is a prosimetric literary form combining prose and haiku. Haibun often take the form of autobiography, essay, travel diary and short stories. The form is very similar to the prose poem, but the haiku and prose must work together to form a coherent piece of writing. The haiku should complement but not repeat the content of the prose and be meaningful as stand-alone poems. Haibun have titles, which reflect the content of the piece. Bashō was the most prominent Japanese writer of haibun with his classic *Narrow Road to the Interior* detailing his epic 1500 mile journey on foot through Edo Japan in the late 17th century. In this extended work, the prose and poetry segment alternate throughout to create a cohesive, often profound, story.

The literary form has transferred successfully to the English language and is a very commonly written form of prose and poetry. Three-line haiku often deviate from the 5-7-5 syllable structure, with a greater emphasis on the cutting words (*kireji*), seasonality (*kigo*) and juxtaposition of images between the two parts of the poem. Haiku can also be presented on one-line. These free-verse haiku allow a large amount of freedom for the writer and the movement is being driven forward by organisations such as the Haiku Society of America and the British Haiku Society. Specialist publications exist to promote the writing of haibun including Contemporary Haibun Online.

Tanka, a classical form of Japanese poetry which has existed for around 1400 years, was known as waka for many centuries. Tanka can be combined with prose to create tanka-prose, a newly emerging form which is superficially similar to haibun. Individual pieces vary from prose with one tanka poem, to many tanka interspersed throughout the prose. Dealing with the tanka first, they can be metrically structured with the traditional five-line syllabic form of 5-7-5-7-7 or free-verse.

The key theme of this third collection of haibun and tanka prose is chronicling a journey through the final illnesses of his parents. His father was almost killed by a heart attack on Remembrance Sunday in 2018, only to survive, which brought the awful realisation that much worse was inevitably to come. Interspersing episodes in this tragic and long decline are fleeting romantic interludes and his mother's battle with dementia. The trauma of this time put Tim's own turbulent childhood into clearer focus, creating a melancholic acceptance that life was forever changed and the past must remain where it is. The haibun and tanka prose are divided into four chapters: 1) Life changes, 2) Loveless roads…, 3) Locked in limbo, 4) The end of time.

Jerome Berglund, *Nun Prophet Press*

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I.

Life Changes

You never forget where you are when you get a call as life-changing as this. Dad survived the impossible situation, 20 minutes without a functioning heart. I drove back to my hometown of Gorleston assuming he had died; to find he'd been resurrected against all odds but with resultant serious brain damage from the hypoxia. We were warned that the outlook was not favourable, but in those early days, hope was all we had so we clung to it just to keep going somehow.

between Scylla and Charybdis

You sail into the channel between the mountains, knowing it's probably a one-way journey, the choice undesirable in a bottle-neck strait. You choose to take the path of greatest resistance in the lee of Scylla's high rock. The cave appears still, no sign of the six-headed serpent. The voyage past her lair is uneventful until she slithers into the sunlight. Forced into the strait's centre by Scylla, each head offers you a future:

"I am death" says the first.
"I am life" snarls the second.
"I am satisfaction" hisses the third.
"I am madness" proclaims the fourth.
"I am euphoria" screams the fifth.
"I am silence" whispers the sixth.

hideous faces
each with a convincing promise
which fate to choose
while the ocean
slips away

Drawn by Scylla's first offer in your weakened state, you ponder the second option, and the potential trickery of the others. Unseen, Charybdis opens its spacious mouth, swallowing a passing ship. Gradually, your boat drifts toward the sea monster's oblivion which rips seagrass from the shore and spits it into the channel. On the cliff, Scylla is not a patient host, it demands an answer.

sea horses
in the whirlpool
keep their secrets
on the edge of Charybdis
father chooses life

Ashby Dell

On a winter morning, the run takes me through the village of Lound, past the lakes and reeds. Fritton Decoy is not far from here, the playground of childhood. The lanes are quiet these days, the new road diverting most of the traffic bound for Belton and Browston Hall. Verges, once dotted with cowslips and primroses in spring, have been consumed by nettles and rank grasses. The hamlet is soon within sight, the red phone box removed many years ago. The old farm buildings are still here though, as are the cottages in the hollow. A horse and carriage trots uphill along the lane, pausing at the fork by father's favourite village sign.

barn owl
flying from hay cart
to graveyard

defib

I run past the memorial bench, over the boardwalk between the lakes, up Eve Hill. After a brief moment to catch my breath on the summit, I descend into birch woods before emerging on a green lane carpeted with chestnut leaves. I maintain the fast tempo, before the lonely chapel by Bunker's Hill is reached. My running watch says four miles. I stop.

flatline
on the steep hill
bleep, bleep, bleep...

second sunset

After the walk along Rushup Edge to the Lord's Seat, I imagine you will be able to make the short walk to the summit of the hill. You're steady over the first few rocks, stopping to enjoy a hare before it disappears into a grass tussock. There are few walkers near the peak; a brisk breeze funnelling through Dovedale and the crowds below.

river stones one step at a time

Mother turns back as the path becomes a scramble for the knoll. You struggle on the loose rocks, stick tapping vigorously. Resting on a boulder, you watch me make it to the summit. I wait for the sun to set twice behind the high point of Thorpe Cloud across the valley.

overhanging ledge the loneliness of wind

Lazarus speaks

Expect nothing he said. It's highly likely there'll be an unfavourable outcome she said. But the eyes have a hint of blue, the breath a sense of urgency. The rise and fall of your chest follows the steady pattern of green spikes on the monitor screen. I almost miss the first mumbled words, something about the church. A visit from the vicar mid-morning and a whistled version of Jerusalem bring a half-smile.

father's lawn
the first frost harder
than expected

life list

On the streets, I crane my neck to watch the skeins fly past in faltering v-formations. There seem to be more this year, migrating daily from Scroby Sands to Fritton Decoy. It's a race against the fading light, the stragglers left to navigate through the west wind alone.

rehab ward...
father watches the flypast
bedridden

mirage

Day by day, they say. He should be dead. Keep him well hydrated on the journey, the wilderness is an unforgiving place. Once you start crossing the desert, there's no turning back. Be patient, travel at night, sleep during the afternoon to avoid the hottest conditions. After twelve months, I see a figure on the horizon: the indistinct shape of an old man, heat shimmering around a static frame.

while we watch
Lawrence of Arabia
in the nursing home
father complains
of the sun in his eyes

a fete worse than death

Three whacks for a pound. Sounds good value to me.
Last year, I won a cheap plastic sword for the kids. It snapped within an hour. This summer's Splat The Rat is in the usual corner of the village green, to the left of the coconut shy by the toilets. I wheel you over and hand the money to the vicar. A couple of shadow swings and you're ready to go. You miss the first rat by some distance. The second rat slips down the drain pipe before you even think to move an arm.

third time lucky
you can't remember
the second

room nine

Dad's birthday party is in full swing. I leave to navigate my way through the low-lit labyrinth of corridors to find the toilet. I'm busting for a piss, and hurry along. Finding a familiar route, I pass by room nine. A large notice cello taped to the door catches me eye. I'm sure it wasn't there yesterday. The next day, the nurses deny all knowledge of room nine, affectionately questioning my sobriety. Eventually, I find the door to room nine, but without its signage. Curious, I try the handle and it turns. The door is already half open when I furiously slam it shut. It feels wrong to inspect the forbidden area. Besides, distant footsteps distract me.

empty room
on clean bedsheets
a depression

The nurse relays the news. Dad's neighbour passed away in the night. A kind release from the debilitating illness that afflicted her we agree. The body was taken at first light, the room quickly made up for the next patient, arriving later today. I ask again about room nine. The nurse just shakes her head, offering a faint smile.

I seek out room nine, the door handle turns. Inside is a rather large bathroom with a walk in shower and no natural light. A little disappointed at the mundane functionality, I turn to leave. The door closes and is locked from the outside. Gripped by invisible hands, I remain motionless as a horrible malady descends. Catatonic, my eyes dilate. The pain of a thousand souls rushes through my mind, one after another. I lose track of time. A new depth of suffering is mine. The final man's pain is the rawest. The intensity of the sorrow unfathomable. Infertility. Childless marriage. Affairs. Divorce. Dementia. Disorder. It's all there, clear as day. With a gust of wind, the man's spirit leaves my body, forcing the door fully open.

light bulb
the purgatory
of shadows

the psychic

I hate these long drives. At least I've got your best wishes to keep me company, communicated via a friend. To be honest, it's all that's keeping me going from petrol station to drive-thru. The straight road cuts through this flat-earth like a Roman arrow. Faraway lights from my hometown blink into view, only snuffed out by oncoming headlights.

oak shadow
the marsh road
has its ghosts

fireman's lift

The soft echo of the living room door closing. First gentle footfall on silent stairs. A deep intake of breath on the eighth step. I pretend to sleep, duvet pulled over my head.

sudden gust
the open window
slams me awake

vertigo

I practice my best Jimmy Stewart impression, you drawl
your effort. Hand shaking you turn the volume down on
the TV mounted high on the hospital wall. I point to the
Golden Gate bridge, you see only bumblebees outside.
Winched into the wheelchair, the journey to the day room
is punctuated by the usual anxiety of movement and fear
of falling.

stuttering...
cherry blossom
outside father's window
clings to the branch
despite the breeze

walled in

I notice a homeless man outside the discount shop. Stirring, he switches on an old radio. The strains of Everybody's Changing by Keane drift along the High Street. The path descends to the supermarket past several tatty post-war bungalows. A pitbull gnaws away at the garden gate, the captive almost through border control. Quickening my pace, I leave the manic dog to its task, for hospital opening hours are strictly enforced.

remembrance day father's first word

t-minus

Father used to accelerate along this stretch of the B1136.
To sister and mum, it was like the Pleasure Beach rollercoaster.
The back road to Norwich was always his preferred route,
avoiding the Acle Straight across the marshes.

blind summit fresh roadkill every time

Thirty years on, I negotiate the Haddiscoe Bends, and take the right-hand turn. The morning frost newly sown fields a white sheen. Driving into the morning mist, I try and take off on the first hump.

ferry road where is that old sinking feeling

les yeux sans visage

your footprint in half-light outline on the far side mask
removed scent of musk dry to touch cloth worn like frost

lamp flicker the aura of ancient eyes

on nights like these

We talk for hours about nights at the speedway and your
holiday to the Rockies. Documentaries about Africa bring tears,
the summit clouds of Kilimanjaro remain a distant dream.
We understand the loneliness of these filthy streets, the sentence
temporary; nine years for you, five for me.

needle drop…
you recall meeting
Matt Monro in sixty-five

prisoners of the furze

king alfred's rope swing pendulum white legged damsel fly
sulphur stag beetle north face old oak labyrinth ash ruins
a lost village

brick by brick your imagination

nemesis of neglect

Time offers little insight, there's no justice for the living and the dead don't care. The case is cold, confined to a lonely bedroom in No. 6, Mornington Crescent. On a chair by the window a cowled black figure peers through blind slats every morning. His view has changed, open fields snuffed out by the monolithic cigarette factory. It's hard to be certain there's anyone there; shadows play tricks on the unwary.

indistinct…
the crimes of one
and another
leave little room
for absolution

** Inspired by painting, Jack the Ripper's Bedroom (Walter Sickert, c. 1906 to 1907).*

check out

I remember it well; you sat on that seat in the burger joint, eating that disgusting burger. Of course you hated it. You're gone now – not dead, just restricted. The toilets were closed then, too.
One day soon, this shitty roadside diner will be as well….

one
for the road
firefly

II.

Loveless roads...

As dad's decline slowly unfurled over the years, it was clear there was to be no companion strong enough to take the journey with me. I must face the fiercest storm, alone.

flyby

We argue over whose empire was bigger, which regime
the most benign. I always play the Trafalgar trump card,
you always retort that our naval hero (not even an admiral)
paid for victory with his life. The debate inevitably turns to
the height of the Corsican corporal. It all depends on the
origin of the measuring implement.

hanging high
Napoleon's portrait
over Nelson

On the long journey, you mention a visit to the Chateaux d'If,
copy of Dumas in your backpack. Tunnelling through the
airport crowds, you'll soon be free from this loneliness.

the stone rose

Back to the wall, you have a view of the street sloping towards the river, where the docked boat, full of dog rose and rot, is marked private, first voyage, forgotten. Rain drops from weatherboard cladding fill an open mind, a grey face the perfect complement for charcoal sky and cobble stones. The belt coils around your waist like a serpent, collar framing a fixed smile. This restraint is only threatened by wind funnelling along the lane, rattling attic windows.

a dash of lilac
from the flower
in untended hair…
a statue's rose
clutched tight

the end

I came here tonight to honour our pact. A true warrior dies on his feet. The gate is half open, chain hanging loose, swinging in the stiff breeze from the salt marsh creek. I follow the drums to the temple where beetles and crickets are entombed in glass cases. The pond by the willow trees is masked in moonlight, the thicket alive with autumn bush-crickets. Stealth is my friend this evening. I must get in unseen, complete my errand, and leave unnoticed. No easy task when so many well-wishers prop up the bar, intoxicated by the joy of the day. It doesn't take long to obtain the answer I seek. As we gather for the group photo, all I receive is a sarcastic look tossed over a dress strap and the assertion that your favourite men are kneeling before you.

doorway silhouette
across the dancefloor
like Colonel Kurtz
in a blood-red
bridesmaid's dress

I wonder whether you notice me leave. I don't look over my shoulder to check, resolve stronger than before. Errand complete. Message received. FUCK YOU scrawled in luminous orange on the car park wall.

a million dreams

Laying on the top of the grassy cliff, I've seen no-one all morning. Two sets of footprints in the sand, some distance apart, lead to the Ness. Perhaps the overcast weather with a hint of drizzle has kept people at home? I drift off to sleep with the sound of the west wind in Yorkshire fog grass.

distant song
a change in wind direction
wakes me

The woman's voice is much closer. She appears to be around the corner of the cliff, just out of sight. Over and over, the chorus of the song is repeated, each time a little louder than before. Eventually, silence reigns over Stutton Ness once more. Intrigued to find the owner of the voice, I quickly descend from my perch and walk briskly around to the headland.

the tide fills
footprints of those
who came before

The swing on the oak is rocking back and forth vigorously, despite the wind having dropped since the woman commenced her song. I rush over to the tree and look up and down the shore. I'm completely alone. Where can she be? I check the disused pit within the clearing. I scour the far reaches of Holbrook Bay with my binoculars.

looking back
profile of a lady
in the dead oak

separate ways

There you are. Cast in iron on the bridge. You watch over the path, clutching an oar to your chest. I like it best when the snow settles on your hair, just one set of footprints beneath the plinth.

after leaving
a padlock on the railing
lovers part

request stop

The train pulls away from Vauxhall station, a solitary carriage taking its time to travel the five miles to Berney Arms. I'm late for our rendezvous by the windmill on the marshes. Last time we met, it was a pleasant surprise to see you, now I'm not sure you'll show up. With the sun behind a thick cloud, the chance of an encounter seems as distant as the Roman ruins across the water.

swallowtail wing
speckled by the shadow
of a mill sail

white flag

The third of July. Eleven fifty nine. I wait for the annual ritual. Nightjar and glow-worm are here. So too, the moonlight filtering through sow-thistle leaves. On the ridge, Roman ruins hold back the hunter Orion. With unseen hands, a pale bundle is thrown from the highest tower. Mummified by a white flag, the body lands in the mud beside me. I glance up to the ruins, half expecting to see her gaunt face.

unwrapped
maggots crawl
on my flesh

wrong side of the tracks

The opulence of the district is evident in each shop window. Passing under the railway line, I notice a large pile of pots, pans, bottles and blankets. In this menagerie are two men, bedded down for the night. One is old and half asleep, the other young, reading a magazine. They take little notice as I walk by, their lives stacked by the roadside. At least there's shelter under the bridge and the night is warm.

Ginza lions
even here, a cricket sings
from concrete

loop the loop

It's been a long day. Thirty degrees and rising. The soda whisky is going down too well. But still, I must run the Imperial Palace loop, five kilometres including the infamous Uchibori Dori climb. Not long into the challenge, it becomes apparent that this was a run too far. Waves of melancholy wash through my mind; regret strikes first. The words I should have said when you left. The things I should have done for my father before the heart attack. Luckily, it's dark, the Imperial guards cannot see my tears. And then the ghosts. They are the worst. I even run into one. The look on his face says it all.

white swan
a reminder of home…
I sigh and toss
my passport
into the moat

Temperance Hotel

In the summer of 1901 I'm sent to the summit hotel on Ben Nevis. There'll be no temptation they said, the sisters run a strict regime. Weekly reports are sent to mother in Fort William. After a dry month I ask a pony guide to bring some whisky up. The illicit deal done, I sneak out in the afternoon away from the watchful sisters and sup the contraband by Five Finger Gully.

brocken spectre
on the cloud
below the ridge –
I'd piss on my halo
if I could stand up

There's no chance of companionship up here. The sisters have been warned about my fragile moods and quick temper, so say little. There's not much wildlife either, save for the odd snow bunting and distant eagle. I'm quite fond of butterflies but the gothic plateau seems too barren for them, the climate just too harsh. Inclement Rag knew this well, his observatory weather records are exhaustive. I think of ending it all; a leap from the cliffs and two thousand feet of freedom should do it.

north face
a cricket leaps
into the mist –
I just can't part
with a fine malt

sister of the moon

I knew it. Should've shut the attic window. Moon dust. Materialisation. When you said forever, you meant it. When I said fuck off, I did too. Oblivion was my escape. And yours.

undead the loneliness of time

the abbey above

Whitby. Ruins on their precipice, the elements claw. The shore has new headstones, sarcophagi litter grey waste. A skeletal arm protrudes from the cliff. Your voice is unexpected. Beguiling. Digits ripple. Beckoning.

even if I could escape nightfall

it was always about Henry

Gotta clean up. This flat is a fucking mess. His little red face greets me as usual; pathologically happy, psychotic even. What's he smiling for? Plastic bastard.

vacuum it's not you it's me

emptiness, free refill

A chance to stretch the legs, explore the airport. The lack of a Visa prohibits exploration of Beijing, besides six hours is not really long enough to visit Tiananmen Square or the Forbidden City. I need sleep more than anything else, a few snatched minutes on the flight from Tokyo far from adequate. Stretched out on boarding gate seating, it's impossible to get any meaningful rest, besides thoughts of leaving you are still too raw. Without any yuan, I have only one option for refreshment. Warm water from the free fountain is all I've got….

airport
restricted area
a tear cannot
be supressed
any longer

the Wellesley

The gate teases us, open just enough to allow a view of the Victorian grandstand. The track's red rubber, a counterpoint to freshly mown grass, clouds unveiling the glass sky. There's no-one around, the groundsman's line marker abandoned on a football pitch. The tea hut door is locked, window bars mark decades of degeneration. In glorious isolation, we stage the Olympic final; old timer versus young pretender.

sprint final…
finish line leaves
a dead heat

devil's mark

The last regular departs after a more than generous amount of drinking up time. There's just the two of us left with the usual jobs before locking up: cashing up the till, cleaning the tables and unloading the dishwasher. I wonder where you are tonight, probably still out the back with the shadows in the old stables. Or maybe you're in the beer garden where the town's prison stood in the time of the Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins. The nefarious bastard dragged Elizabeth Clark from the pub to be tortured, imprisoned and hanged as a 'witch' in collusion with the devil. But it's not their ghosts I wait for. You are much more subtle, easy to forget about until you appear like unwanted memories of an abusive and unloved partner.

corner of the eye –
a shadow passes
the window
filling the doorway
with emptiness

quiz night

The carpet cleaning guy has turned up early. I'll have to move the tables and chairs in the haunted pub. I stop at OUR round table, we were the winning team – the smiles, stroke of my arm, it was all possibilities then. That was before your crisis and mine. They tell me you were in town a week ago, not drunk this time, just sad.

séance
I'll move the glass
for a change

icon

I always knew your cold prose would land in my inbox.
The profile pic is unchanged with its feral smile and wild eyes.
The promise drowned in the reality of you. And me.

slow click
I cannot cheat
the mouse

midnight, the stars and you

I haven't noticed this wine bar before. The door is half ajar, beside a sign proclaiming an impressive array of cocktails and spirits. The late hour emptiness has its own appeal, the old-fashioned décor reminds me of a ship. There are skulls in jars, paintings of coastal storms and fully stocked shelves of gin and whisky behind the bar. The bartender's sliver smile and penetrating gaze greets me. The photo they produce is of an abbey high on the open clifftop. The surrounding meadows of my hometown are familiar even if the ruins are not. Inside the abbey are dozens of unrecognisable people.

another glass
of bourbon
on the rocks
the past left
to one side

The town hall clock chimes twelve times. I say goodnight, it's getting late. Outside, the cobbled streets have changed. The town hall is missing, the old library gone too. Stumbling around, I find a bench by the shore and sleep takes me. The vanity of Cassiopeia presides over a cloudless sky. By tomorrow evening who knows where I'll be drinking.

they say
a drunk finds
their way home
wherever
that is

lost boys

I was part of the farmer's gang that built this seawall. Clover is restricted to the slope of the embankment and the edge of the shallow dyke. A ginger bumblebee collects pollen from a patch of scarlet flowers near the sluice. The salt works has gone, a red hill is all that remains. The view of the mudflats is much the same; a narrow creek of samphire and seablite winds into the estuary. A young boy is walking the gravel path, not far from me. Lost in his thoughts, he does not look up.

skylark nest
the afternoon fledges

unicorns

I don't know if you even saw me on the seawall path –
I caught your voice on the breeze, deeper than ever.
Something about mortgages and your new husband. Stopping
and talking was out of the question. Too much time has
passed; tragedies you can't know, never got the chance
to know. In some ways it's better like this….

new love
is it better to stay
unicorns

fire woman

I retreat to the safety of the belltower; the gargoyles' sanctuary. Straightened out, an unfamiliar city stretches before me; where are the hunched gallows? Flames consume the spire, smoke lost to the Parisian sky. Clinging to the rope, I notice a figure gliding through the inferno below, the collapsed ceiling, no impediment. The fire doesn't touch her, or the fumes overcome. Her eyes smoulder like ruins.

untouched
rooftop hive...
the beekeeper
needs no protection
from my sting

watchtower

I sit and watch from the lookout. In the moonlight, a woman walks hastily along the street below. She seems pre-occupied with her thoughts, unaware of the early morning chill or melancholic moon over the ocean. A cumulonimbus cloud dominates the horizon, internal flashes of white betray a gathering storm. In the blackness between the streetlights, I lose sight of her near the cliff steps.

breakwater
the sea keeps
its secrets

the world is yours

one hundred feet of altitude doesn't sound much does it
running uphill following dirt tracks to the green lane
by bluebell wood having said this I'll keep to the flatlands
it's what I think you want

even if I could go beyond the hills more hills

ghost

I doubt you saw me leave quietly the first time, you were too busy partying. I made it miles before your text filled hollow eyes. This time I'll disappear through brick not door crack, this time you won't even notice and I won't check my phone.

words
you'll never read
set in stone

this ghost doesn't say goodbye

The mission is the first of its kind. Rumours abound of a nebula composed of emotions in the far reaches of the universe. The stars are arranged in a crab formation, giving off a piercing shaft of light every few seconds, said to induce mania or melancholia depending on the colour. The trip is long, with a thousand years in deep sleep. They need someone without any family connections and certainly no partner. I volunteered straight away.

escape
a time
and space

Streams of blue light disappear in all directions at the Cassandra Crossroads. It's impossible to know which path to follow. You should in the viewing gallery of the space station. I don't know whether you can see me in the ship's window. Dark brown hair reflects the artificial light off an elegant sheen, pale eyes not possessive but pensive. You've worn THAT black and white dress. I'm under no illusion about my feelings. I wonder how it feels for you…. after a lengthy testing process, rockets fire and you're gone soon enough, like all the others.

thousand-year sleep
no less
lonely

The ship's computer wakes me from stasis – there is no way back. It always was a suicide mission. Flickering on the screen is a hologrammatic version of the woman I loved back on earth. There was no way you could've come with a daughter to look after. But there's a strange comfort from my artificial companion, programmed into the computer by you as a futile gesture of affection. The elegance of the dress – the smile – the straight hair – as I remember.

overcoming
my programming
computer

I feel it before the image appears on the screen – melancholia, followed by mania. The exhilaration and despair is much worse than anything my mind produces. You're there in the clouds of scarlet dust, face clear as Orion's belt.

rogue planet
a replica of you
is all I have

I've made a mistake. The universe will not let me forget it. Steering the ship towards oblivion, the sadness is almost too much to bear…

real hands
on a cold shoulder
false vacuum

You've been here all along! During rocket testing, you snuck on with your daughter and entered stasis. We hug and kiss for the first time in over a thousand years.

course set
a distant sun
in blackness

when you least expect it

It's lonely up here, a thousand feet above the blackened swill of waterlogged fields. Vibrations on the ladder disrupt my concentration on the dish repair, I'm not expecting visitors. And there you are on the inadequate platform, an operative sent to the wrong mast. Small talk is difficult at this height but somehow we manage. I can't believe it, we have so much in common. You love Hitchcock, Dylan Thomas, punk, haiku, grasshoppers, glow-worms and cricket. Not only that, but you love transmitter tourism! You've still to take a selfie with the fabricated zinc galvanised steel Mendlesham mast in Suffolk. We make our plans….

while you hand
me the spanner
our dream
is shattered
by sunrise

III.

Locked in limbo

The hope of the first two years of dad's miraculous survival disappeared into the purest form of melancholia. We connected through facial expressions, eye contact, music and television, alone. Looking back, it was better than nothing.

metronome

You're sat in the dark, solar sumo ornament no longer active. Ray wanders past your door, making his way slowly to Mabel's poster of Gene Pitney by the lift. He returns within minutes, and then again, and again, and again. He must wander, pausing only to lay on the carpet for a short rest. A nurse brings a cup of tea, thickened to avoid asphyxiation. You can't manage to raise the cup to your lips. To anyone else it would be a defeat.

precipice goat…
a flickering documentary
about the Himalayas

the eyes have it

Raiders of the Lost Ark can't possibly offend. Besides, you've been in bed all day, the action could be what you need. We've missed the rolling boulder, the snakes, airfield fight and the truck chase. And how on earth did Indy get to the island on that submarine without drowning? This is lost on you, a few mumbled words are the only response we get. The ghosts of the Ark unleashed, you seem shocked when one changes into a destroying angel.

eyes wide open
don't you
remember death

i remember Bergerac

Another re-run. Another November afternoon. The detective drama takes its usual lazy post-Columbo path. Lots of moody looks from John Nettles and scolding put downs by the hoity Inspector. Throw in some pretty dull chat with a posh fellow sipping wine on a sun lounger and we have telly for the middle classes. He used to love this programme in the 80s. Now, father watches in silence. I ask him if he remembers the show.

father whistles
a different theme tune
in a random key

unhaunted

I'm still waiting for you to leave lonely man in the attic room.
I heard footsteps on floorboards before they broke both legs
but not your spirit. Now all I hear is a mutter, something about
sky taken away.

sunlit
the ceiling
craters

escape room

It's been there over five years, perched on the windowsill of a retirement home room overlooking the pallid expanse of estuary mudflats and salt marsh. The upwards tilt has caught northern lights, the Milky Way and all those phases of the moon over Mistley. I've never seen anyone use it, not even seen a shadow on the wall. They say the average stay in the home is four years, sometimes much longer…

clear night
I wonder how far
telescopes take you

Prairie Stop

In the alley behind the dentists, I find a head by the bins. Outside the public toilets, a torso in a telephone box. Legs and arms on the pitcher's mound complete the automaton build. When assembly is complete, I wait for speech. It does not come. I wait for movement. It does not come. He just stands there, expressionless, motionless. It's not the discovery I'd hoped for or remember.

before I realise
it's another
ghost town
the hope
of kinship

I'm taken to a deserted bus stop where I alight in silence. My father used to be the life and soul of that fucking town.

one road in
one road out
just my luck
tail lights
of the last bus

the old depot

So this is it. London Colney. They used to run coaches from here. Coaches that took us to the foothills of the Pyrenees. That was then, nineteen eighty-six. Now is Christmas Day, twenty twenty-two. I'm all alone by the bridge over the brook, far from dad's nursing home. Despite the company of friends earlier, the quietness of this backwater feels appropriate. At this moment, I have little to live for. No future beyond the isolation of the copse by the cottage.

just another
lonely crossroads –
if you won't end it
then maybe
i will

nephilim

Eyelids flick. Red, yellow, blue light streaks past. Speech is impossible. Time has no effect here. This journey is one way. No bed lift needed at my destination. People walk into the sterile room, talking. I can't make out many words. One looks familiar. Prostrate on the mattress, I blink once more.

black hole
this time
a teardrop

IV.

The end of time

The moment we dreaded for so long arrives. Nothing can ever be the same again.

high noon

After six years of not knowing when the end would come, the final countdown takes it time. The date is set; the lonely walk between those lime trees to the door plays out in my mind on sleepless nights. When the time comes, I'll be there, unready as a child…

beginning
the chime
of a church bell

into Abraham's embrace

Let me wrap you in these tatty grave clothes, those given to a different Lazarus, six years ago. I've kept them in the back room, watched them yellow and decay. Ignoring me, you fixate on the angels in the artex. One last time a narrowed eye follows me around the room. The clammy skin returns; only at the end does letting go make sense.

your passing
fields greener
this autumn

tunnel vision

You never know when the call is THE call. Get back soon, it's imminent. The frantic drive, the relief you're still alive when I get there. Your breath rattles but the skin has more colour and warmth than expected. There's surprising awareness given the brain injury's degeneration over the years. You can't make it through one last time, can you?

the illusion
of choice –
crossroads

Frank

By Jupiter's rings, I watch you drift away into the darkness
of death, gradually becoming smaller in the capsule window
in your orange space suit. Who knows where you'll be
in a thousand years?

vacuum
loneliness
is for the living

Inspired by Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968).

maybe, you won't come at all

The first time you never came. I waited a long time. In forest clearings and dreams. All I found was a skull, half buried on a path. The jaw was missing, identity, unknown. The second time you never came, either. The tower was empty, until the top floor. Doors opened and slammed shut. The suggestion of a haunting. Until….

blurry eyed
I know it's a dream
about a ghost

Postscript – the old house

Dad's death brought so much childhood trauma back to the surface. It was then I realised I'd been trapped in the past all along, life had become a museum with no exit.

manhunt

The hunters' count has finished. Innocent mouths whisper. We scatter into the dark vacuum beneath pine trees. I scout around the edge of the campsite, tripping on a rope and flattening a couple in a flimsy tent. I run for the cover of gorse bushes before they discover who crushed their fragile frames. The game has progressed, several teammates have been captured. Torch beams dart between trees, driven by the over-excited hands of the hunters. The clearing's edge is ideal for an assault on the hunters' base, a tree trunk in the open. I have one shot at this.

cut down
by torchlight's anonymity
my flashback
clear as
the hay moon

ready to go

Anita's enthusiasm pulls us through another tardy Wednesday afternoon, spewing forth Larkin's masterpiece. Awoken from the poetic spell by the crass tones of the bell, it's time for poker in the common room. Sad steps lead past the stereo, for once drum and bass has been replaced with a surge of Britpop defiance and despair. The usual associates assemble around the pock-marked poker table. A barrage of swear words accompany each full house. I fall early in proceedings to three of a kind; a relief in some ways, I'm skint as usual.

busted flush
I fare better
in trumps

Dragging myself from the melee, I play the queen of hearts at table tennis. Her backhand is lethal; somehow my awkward top spin wins a few points. We kiss, the kind of youthful slobber that passes for love. Sharing a puff by the bike sheds, we talk of our favourite Smiths' lyrics. Together we re-enter the common room, choosing the leather sofa by the window. Familiar insults accompany our re-emergence, they're just jealous I suppose. Sitting silently, the isolation increases. My course is set; there's no turning away from the melancholy inside.

first love
a comma butterfly
on the window

private trap

i was born in mine you stepped into yours while we're not so
different really neither can do much so let the grass grow
unchecked in an empty lot where the sun sets one step at a time

supermoon
i wanted to believe
in the day

Inspired by Hitchcock's Psycho (1960)

sit down

They were the nights. The nervous queue to see if you'd get in, shit beer, college chat up lines and arguing over whose money was on the pool table. By two the DJ was ready for the last track. We sat down as the lyrics implored, too drunk to care that the floor was a combination of sweat, alcohol and piss.

comedown
a key turns
in the lock

in absentia

I can barely bring myself to ascend the stairs of my childhood home. Out of curiosity I enter my old bedroom, curtains still closed on the autumn grey scape. Junk is strewn everywhere – books, ornaments and old toys. I notice the calendar of woodland landscapes on the wall. It's been stuck on November, twenty-eighteen, for the past six years….

forest
where is your meaning
now

Dallas

I always thought I'd be the last survivor of the Nostromo, saving the cat and nuking the ship. Turns out I'm more like Dallas. Courageous, with a slightly foolhardy edge entering the air ducts with nothing more than an incinerator unit and my colleagues wired in. Fumbling around with just flame shadows for company and panicked words on the radio, the way forward is unclear. All the while it waits for my wrong move. Ready to embrace my mistake…

crossroads
the dead end
of another life

** Inspired by Ridley Scott's Alien (1979).*

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FURY OF MY FART – Adjei Agyei-Baah

HUSHPUPPY – Kelly Moyer

MANSIONS OF THE MOON – Kathy Watts

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MOTHER POMEGRANATE – Kelly Moyer

POURING LIGHT ON THE HILLS – Chin & Onyedikam

PRESSED BETWEEN PALMS – Adele Evershed

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RICE AND BEANS – Jerome Berglund

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VARIATIONS ON THE PLANETS – Ettinger & Gilbert

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EAST OF ARRAS

THE FLINTKNAPPER'S GHOST

GLADE RUNNER

GLOWING, GLOWING, GONE?

THE GRASSHOPPERS OF ESSEX

HOPPING BACK TO HAPPINESS

MASK OF MATSUSHIMA

ON THE EDGE

SILENT RUNNING

THE SKY, TAKEN AWAY

THE VOYAGE OF THE QUEEN BEE

WILDERNESS

WINDOWLESS ROOM

Dr. Tim Gardiner is an ecologist, editor, essayist, poet and children's author from Manningtree in Essex, UK. His haiku have been published in many literary magazines including *Blithe Spirit*, *Frogpond*, and *Presence* while longer poems have appeared in *Poetry Quarterly* and *Salopeot*. His first collection of poetry Wilderness was published by Brambleby Books. He has published many scientific papers on natural history and several books, including one about glow-worms. He is a former co-editor of the tanka prose section of Haibun Today.

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